

Chapter One

I held my breath, wincing at how loud my tires crunched on my ex-boyfriend's gravel driveway at this hour of the morning. My heart hammered in my chest, and I momentarily considered just giving up and leaving. But I'd come this far already, and I refused to allow my hesitation to keep me from continuing. I turned off my headlights and pulled around behind the little one-story brick house he'd inherited from his parents a few years ago.

I can't lose my nerve now, I thought. This could be my only chance to get Pop's Lodge ring back without having to talk to Marcus to do it. Unfortunately, my logical mental arguments did nothing to slow down my panicking heart rate. *This is a bad idea. Why did I listen to Jess anyway?*

Digging my phone out of my purse, I scrolled through my contacts list and tapped my best friend's name. No way in hell was she going to be awake at 5:15 AM, but this whole thing was her stupid idea. Of course, I'd been the stupid one to go along with it, but since I apparently hadn't smartened up enough to turn back, then the least she could do was support me via phone.

"Is someone dead?" Jess's voice was foggy and sleep-slurred when she answered. "Someone better be dead for you to be calling me this early, Jo."

"Nobody's dead, but I'm freaking the fuck out because I decided to go through with your crazy idea," I hissed, squeezing my steering wheel with my free hand in an attempt to ground myself.

"Wait, you're in Marcus' house right now?" Her voice was fully alert now.

Apparently, learning I was breaking into my ex-boyfriend's house at Jess's instigation worked better than coffee as an early morning pick-me-up.

"Not exactly." I chewed on my bottom lip for a second and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. "I mean, I'm not inside his house. I'm sitting in my car behind his house with the headlights off. I haven't actually worked up the guts to go inside yet."

"I swear to God if you waste an opportunity like this because you freaked and chickened out, you better not whine to me about your Pop's Lodge ring ever again, Joelle." Jess's tone was hard and a little on the judgmental side.

I wanted to be offended, but she was right to be worried about me chickening out. There was a reason I was sitting in my car talking to her instead of looking around Marcus' house for the gold chain with my grandfather's Lodge ring on it.

"I'm not chickening out," I hissed, though that definitely seemed like the smart thing to do. "I just...I kind of need you on the phone with me while I do this." Otherwise, I really might not go through with it. I had to wonder, was that actually such a bad thing? Then I remembered that I needed to get my grandfather's ring back, and I didn't want to have to see or speak to Marcus to do it. So I was left with no other choice. Still... "I'm freaking, and I need your support. I've never broken into anywhere in my life."

"It doesn't count as breaking in if you still have a key to your ex's place." She couldn't quite hide the edge of sarcasm in her tone, and I could practically feel her rolling her eyes at me. "And retrieving something that actually belongs to you doesn't count as theft, so let me just cut your adorably law-abiding brain off at the pass on that one, okay? Now get your ass inside and take back what's yours before you run out of time!"

“Okay, okay! Fine. I’m going.” I turned off my car and pulled Marcus’ spare key out of the side pocket in my purse. “I’m putting you on speaker phone so I can talk to you and use my phone’s flashlight at the same time, but be quiet until I tell you I’m inside, okay?”

“Yep,” Jess yawned.

I whispered a stream of nervous cuss words as I let myself out of the car. I shut the door as quietly as possible, holding my breath and hoping none of the neighbors were awake to hear the soft thump. The cold morning air instantly penetrated my scrubs and had me wishing I’d grabbed my hoodie out of the back seat, but it was too late to worry about that now. I didn’t want to risk making any more noise than I could help, and I didn’t know how much time I had to accomplish my mission.

I tiptoed up the concrete porch steps to the back door, silently thanking God that it wasn’t a creaky wooden porch like the one at my parents’ house, or someone would have probably heard me and called the cops for sure. All I could hear as I slipped my key in the lock and let myself in was the rush of blood pounding in my ears. I eased the door shut behind me and leaned against it for a second, trying to calm my breathing.

The lights were out, and I knew no one was home, but that knowledge didn’t lessen the tight feeling in my chest at sneaking around like this. I obviously wasn’t cut out for a life of crime, or intrigue. Or anything exciting really.

“Okay, I’m in,” I whispered, feeling my way around the kitchen bar.

I wanted to get away from the back door before turning my flashlight on because the dog door had a clear flap, and I was sure the neighbors would be able to see the light shining through it if anyone happened to be up. Maybe that was just paranoia, but I wasn’t willing to take the chance.

“How are you this freaked out right now?” Jess asked over the phone, her voice sounding loud in the dark kitchen. “You’re an ER nurse. I’ve seen you treat guys with bullet wounds and not freak out this bad.”

“Totally different situations,” I argued as I swiped up from the bottom of my phone’s screen and tapped the flashlight icon. I cringed and dropped into a crouch as the light flared to life. “I can handle blood and guts, but this is—”

“Just shut up and get the necklace with your grandpa’s ring on it before people start waking up for the day.”

Well, that was rude, the way she’d cut me off, but I guess she had a point. This was not the time for a casual chit-chat.

“I’m going,” I hissed as I crept into the hall that led back to Marcus’ bedroom.

My heart started pounding even harder as I began to ease the bedroom door open. I expected the hinges to emit a loud squeak worthy of a horror movie, but the door swung inward silently at my touch. I really was behaving ridiculously. I gave the room a quick once-over.

Marcus’ truck hadn’t been there when I pulled in, but it was still a relief to find the bedroom empty. The sheets were rumpled and the comforter was tossed back like he’d left in a hurry. I had to swallow a searing flash of residual jealousy as I thought about all the times he snuck out without explanation, and I woke up alone in this bed.

I had never liked that he insisted on keeping secrets from me. He never wanted to tell me where he went. Which had left me to wonder why not? What had he been up to? I still didn’t know. And

probably never would. Though I couldn't shake the insidious suspicion that it must have something to do with another woman...or women.

The room smelled like cinnamon and Old Spice shower gel, and my gut clenched at the familiar, sexy-as-hell scent that was uniquely Marcus.

"Good grief," I murmured.

"What? He's not back, is he?" Jess asked, her voice alarmed for the first time since I woke her up.

"No, it's not that. I'm just really glad I decided to do this while he wasn't here because the whole bedroom smells like him and it's messing with my head, among other things." I hated that he could still affect me this way even though I had been the one to decide it was over.

Jess stifled a laugh on the other end of the phone as I padded around to what used to be my side of the bed. Some friend she was, laughing at my discomfort. But I didn't bother to say it out loud. I flicked on the light by the nightstand where I'd left my necklace that held Pop's ring.

"Son of a bitch," I hissed.

"What now?" Jess gasped, sounding like she was watching a soap opera and chowing down on popcorn instead of listening to me sneaking around my ex's house.

"The necklace isn't here. I left it on the nightstand on my side of the bed, and the damn thing is completely cleaned off except for the lamp."

"Are you a hundred percent sure that's where you left it?"

"Yeah, I'm positive." I groaned and sat down hard on the edge of the bed, doing some deep breathing to try to calm down.

"Maybe Marcus finally accepted that you weren't coming back and started to pack your stuff up or something?" Jess suggested.

"Okay, yeah. That kind of makes sense. Now all I have to do is figure out where he put it, grab it, and get the hell out of here before he comes back." I pushed up off the edge of the bed and swept my light around the room, looking for a box, or anything that might be mine.

My heart sank when I didn't see anything. I moved to the closet and slid the door open, checking every inch of it from shelf to floor.

"Damn," I huffed in frustration.

"Nothing yet?" Jess prodded.

I didn't respond right away as I hurried back over to the nightstand and opened the drawer, slamming it shut again a few moments later when I came up empty. "It's definitely not in the bedroom," I muttered. I did a hurried check through the gray-tiled en-suite bathroom, too, but didn't see anything there, either.

"Okay, that's not great, but it's not the end of the world either. Just do a fast sweep of the rest of the rooms in the house from one end to the other. If you don't find it this time, maybe come back and try again some other time?"

I didn't know if I would be able to work up the nerve to do this again. "I really just wanted to get in, get my necklace, and be done with this business forever after today," I groaned as I crossed the hall to Marcus' spare bedroom.

"I feel you, but you can't focus on that right now. You have no idea when Marcus might come back, so just do a quick sweep and get out. Because the longer you're there, the more likely

you are to get caught.” Since when had Jess become the voice of reason? She was usually much better at leading me into sticky situations than getting me out of them.

I shouldn’t need her to remind me of the ticking clock hanging over my head, counting down the minutes or seconds that I had left, but obviously I did. Which made it equally obvious why I’d needed Jess on the phone with me while I did this.

“Okay, yeah. You’re right,” I agreed as I swept my light around the spare bedroom. “Nothing here, either,” I grumbled after checking the closet there, too. The bed looked a little more rumpled than usual, like maybe Marcus had slept in the guest bedroom recently, or he’d piled stuff on the bed and then moved it elsewhere.

“Keep moving,” Jess urged.

I let myself out of the spare bedroom and moved up the hall toward the bathroom, linen closet, and Marcus’ office.

“I feel stupid checking the spare bathroom, but I’d hate myself if it was in here and this was the one place I failed to look,” I mused as I stepped into the carnation pink tiled homage to the 1970s.

I took a quick peek around and checked under the sink before shaking my head and closing the door behind me.

“Waste of time?” Jess questioned when I remained silent for too long.

“Unfortunately, yes, but I was willing to risk it just in case.” I sighed, moving to the linen closet to tug the door open. “I feel naked without that necklace. Pop’s death is still too raw for me to be without it. I feel like he’s still watching over me when I wear it.”

Finding nothing of interest in the linen closet, I eased the door closed. Disappointment and terror that Marcus might be home at any minute warred in my chest.

“Now is not the time for that, girlfriend. Get a move on!” Jess urged.

I followed her directive, ignoring the pang of guilt I felt as I let myself into Marcus’ office. He was crazy private about his work, which was yet another constant argument between us. Once upon a time, I’d agreed to stay out of his office out of respect for the privacy his job required. Even going back on my word post-breakup felt like a bit of a betrayal. But I couldn’t allow that to stop me now. I needed to find my necklace. I had to get Pop’s ring back.

I swept my light around the room but didn’t see anything that looked like it belonged to me, and no boxes, either. I paused, just for a second, to frown at a picture of Marcus that was stuck to the side of his filing cabinet with a magnet. He was laughing and having a beer with a group of people I didn’t know. There was a really pretty girl with violet hair, and I would have been insanely jealous of her, if not for the fact that she was sitting on the lap of a guy who looked like the physical embodiment of the tall, dark, and handsome concept in Armani casual. There was another, girl, too, and this time the jealousy was real because Marcus had his arm around this cute little redhead’s shoulders. They looked more than close. Obviously, I’d been right about there being another woman.

“Ugh!” I growled.

“What?” Jess demanded. “Did Marcus come back?”

“No. He’s probably with her right now.”

“With who?” Jess asked in confusion.

“I knew I was right to dump him!” I crossed my arms, glaring at the picture.

“What’s going on? You didn’t answer my question. Her who? Who are you talking about, Jo?”
“I found a picture,” I sighed, “He’s with a bunch of people I’ve never met, and he’s looking extremely friendly with an adorable, perky redhead that I can’t even begin to hold a candle to.”
“Is there any chance that the picture is from before or after you and he were together?” Jess’s tone was that of a best friend walking on eggshells.

I winced. “I wish. He’s wearing the shirt I bought him for his birthday back in July, and everyone in the picture is wearing summer clothes, so it has to have been this past summer.” I groaned, shaking my head.

If he’d kept this from me—all these people who clearly had more than a passing acquaintance with him—then what else hadn’t he told me? How many other secrets did he have that I’d known nothing about, even as we shared a house and slept in the same bed? Had I actually known Marcus at all?

“Okay, that definitely sucks,” Jess’s voice broke into my dark thoughts. “But now really isn’t the time to dwell on this kind of thing, is it? You need to find your necklace and get the hell out of there before Marcus comes home or one of his neighbors decides to be nosy.”

Her reminder shook me out of my self-pitying stupor, and I slipped back out of the office, easing the door shut behind me. As I padded back up the hall, the sound of the dog door flapping and magnetically snapping back into place shattered the quiet in the house. The sudden knowledge that I wasn’t the only intruder here froze me in my tracks.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered. “Something just came through Marcus’ dog door. Gotta go.”

“Wait! Don’t you da—”

I cut her off with a tap of the red “end call” button and steeled myself for whatever I might find waiting for me in the kitchen.